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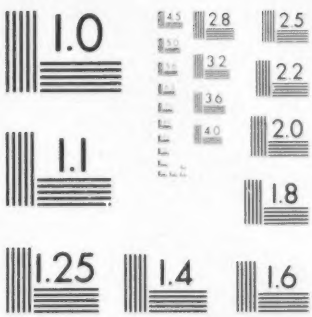

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ED252074

WORKING PAPERS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Number 27

December, 1975

Tuneful weeping: A mode of communication

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Sponsored by the Social Science Research Council
Committee on Sociolinguistics
Prepared and distributed at

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Tuneful weeping: A mode of communication

The speech communities in which this mode of communication is used are situated in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the Northern part of the Indian subcontinent. Although Hindi, the national language, is spoken and understood very well in them, the vast majority of the members of these communities use BHOJPURI, Magahi or Maithili as the only medium of communication in their daily life. It may be that other Indian communities also use weeping as a mode of communication, but the writer of these lines does not possess any reliable information on this subject. Therefore, this report will limit itself to the description of this communicative mode as it obtains in these speech communities only. These are predominantly agricultural communities that live in the village, and are centred round the land they cultivate. Literacy is not widespread and caste hierarchy is rigidly maintained. Women observe 'purdah' and very few of them get the opportunity to go out to school and receive whatever education is available in the village school. Men, especially upper caste men, do not like their women to violate the 'purdah' system. It is very different with lower caste men and women, inasmuch as 'purdah' is not an inviolable system with them. Lower caste women work together with their men to earn their living. But it has been observed that no sooner a lower caste man has enough of property so that his existence is not dependent upon daily wages than he starts imitating the behaviour patterns of the upper caste men, and the women in his family begin to observe 'purdah' system.

In these communities there are marked differences between men's and women's speech, particularly with regard to the intonation patterns, terms of address, and the patterns of verbal insults and abuses. The characteristic intonation patterns in women's speech sound exaggerated to the men of these communities. The pitch rise is higher, and the pitch fall lower than is normal with the intonation contours in men's speech. The gestures accompanying the utterances are also different for males and females. The men have one set of swear terms, exclamatory utterances, and the women have another set. The women use one set of terms to describe or designate the members of their in-laws' family, which is different from the set of terms used by men for the same purpose. There are marked differences between the patterns of verbal insults and abuses favoured by men and women of these communities. When a man seeks to insult another man, he might do so by constructing a sentence in which he announces to the world his intentions to copulate with the other's mother, or grandmother, sister, or daughter, etc. That is, men feel insulted when the chastity of their women is threatened by another man. Women, on the other hand, insult each other by narrating to the world their imputed sexual adventures with their fathers and brothers and sons. They also curse each other with barrenness or widowhood. The wealth and variety of these verbal insults, and the linguistic patterns used for this purpose is the subject of another paper under preparation.

These differences in the speech habits of men and women are so marked that if a man develops the habit of using the speech patterns characteristic of women, he is immediately described, and condemned, as effeminate. In

Bhojpuri and Magahi there is even a word for such a person, and that is /maug/, which can be glossed as 'effeminate'. The corresponding word in Maithili is /maugiah/. A /maug/ is a male whose speech habits and characteristic gestures bear strong resemblances to the speech habits and gestures characteristically associated with women in these communities. We have stated these differences simply to bring home the point that the men and women in this society use the same linguistic code but make different selections of its communicative and expressive features available to the users of this language.

However, with regard to weeping as a mode of communication men differ radically and completely from women. This mode of communication is not available to men of these communities at all. Even a /maug/ cannot use this mode and encode his messages in it. It should be obvious that involuntary, spontaneous crying caused by some sudden pain is not what we have in mind. This variety of crying or weeping is common to both men and women and it is quite natural. What we have in mind here is the kind of weeping which the society prescribes as the most appropriate behaviour for women in certain well-defined social situations. It is the one medium of communication which a woman alone can use to transmit her messages. This prescribed weeping is not necessarily born out of any sharp physical pain. The woman who weeps in the social situations that call forth this behaviour may do so out of sadness, but she does not have to have sorrow in heart. And moreover, weeping in this case, is not just crying and shedding tears; it is a very well-organized set of wept statements. What is meant by 'wept statement' is that while the women weep they make statements on certain well-defined topics and themes. These statements are not simply spoken or uttered as other statements are spoken and uttered; they are given the form of weeping;

hence, they are wept statements. These statements can be made only through the act of weeping. If weeping is suppressed the message is changed beyond recognition. In other words, these statements admit of no paraphrases. They carry a rich emotional charge which would be lost if they are simply spoken aloud without the accompaniment of weeping. They are more like sung statements or statements in poetry. The women are fully conscious of the emotive power of these wept statements, and they do all they can by means of vocal embellishments to enrich the emotional content of their statements. Thus, it is institutionalized weeping prescribed as the right kind of response to given social situations. And only women are privileged to make use of this mode of communication.

The social situations in which weeping occurs are well-defined and easily identifiable. From the style of weeping we can reconstruct the situation that has occasioned it, and if we know about the situation from before we can predict the prescribed style of weeping. One of the situations in which weeping is, as it were, the only mode of communication available to a woman, is when, after her marriage, the daughter leaves her parents' house for her husband's house. In the villages she is usually carried in a palanquin all covered from every side. She can go by bullock-cart also, and the poor ones just walk. But they all weep, rich and poor, irrespective of their economic status and regardless of the means of transport they use. Among the tradition-bound, illiterate village girls, it is a universal practice. But it is fast disappearing; it is almost non-existent among the educated, urbanized girls of these communities. When the day and the time of the departure of the married girl from her parents' home for her spouse's home is finally settled, the entire village comes to know of it. The women of the village, specially her kinswomen, start visiting her. She

greets them all by crying over their shoulder. The visitor and the girl sit down with one's head on the other's shoulder, their arms enfolding each other, and weep tunefully. Each such session of weeping may last from five to fifteen minutes. It is believed that the more affectionate the bond between the weeping partners the longer lasts the session of weeping. For such a weeping session there is even a term in Bhojpuri and Magahi; it is /bhẽt/, which may be glossed as 'meeting (some one)'. In Magahi speech community, /bhẽt/, usually begins in the morning and continues for quite a while. In such a /bhẽt/ it is the senior partner who has the responsibility of stopping first in weeping, and then she spends a few minutes in persuading the girl to stop crying. The girl does not immediately accede to the requests of her senior weeping partner. She holds out against her entreaties and continues to weep. The longer she holds out the more does she show, it is believed, her affection for the other woman. Even if women from the village do not visit the girl, she performs /bhẽt/ with her mother, or grandmother every day until she finally leaves for her spouse's home.

Now this kind of weeping is not frantic or disorganized. It is certainly not a matter of simply shedding tears. The weepers weep out well-made statements; their weeping is tuneful; their wept statements have a marked structure. Every statement ends with a refrain which is made up of the term of address which the girl uses for her weeping partner. The terms are /kãki/ 'aunt', /phũā/ 'father's sister', /bhəuji/ 'brother's wife', /bəhinia/ 'sister', /aji/ 'grandmother', /mai/ 'mother', and other kinship terms which the girl uses to address her partner. These terms are Bhojpuri terms. Magahi and Maithili terms are also broadly similar with certain variations in the phonemic sequences representing them. The departing girl also holds the feet of her father, brother, uncle, or other male members of

the family and performs the activity called /bhẽt/, that is, the activity of meeting them. The males of course do not weep tunefully like her. They are touched and moved by her weeping and by her wept statements, and silently shed tears while trying to console her and persuade her to stop weeping.

The usual topics of the wept statements are the memories of the past lived with her weeping partner; the fear of the unknown future in an unknown place; her apologies for not having been as dutiful or respectful towards her partner as she ought to have been; and finally her appeal for forgiveness for the past acts of commission and omission, and then requests to everybody never to forget her. The immediate addressee is no doubt the individual weeping partner, but the message is directed to all who are present there or all who can hear her. The other partner, if she is an older and maturer woman, assures the weeping girl of her forgiveness, seeks to allay her fears of the unknown future and promises to be solicitious of her well-being no matter how far away is the place of her residence. Both pledge their love and regard for each other repeatedly and effusively. But in case the girl makes the wept statements to a male kinsman of hers, he does not respond to them by making similar statements. Of course he does not weep, and he keeps asking the girl lovingly and very politely to stop crying and worrying about her future life. He too pledges his future for her.

Some weepers sound more tuneful than others; they weep out their statements with greater artistry and effectiveness, and women comment on their ability to move people deeply by their weeping. The very young girls of ten or even below, who are married and are sent off to their in-laws' place do not perform /bhẽt/ as well as the grown-up girls do. It has to be learnt like any other learned behaviour pattern of the society. Naturally the grown-up girls get more time in which to imitate and cultivate the

appropriate style, but the young girls lack the extended experience of this behaviour pattern. It is quite customary for little girls to play the game of marrying their dolls and performing all the rituals characteristic of real life marriages. At the end when they send off the female doll to the imagined home of the male doll they imitate the weeping act also. This is one of the ways the girls get initiated into the art of tuneful weeping.

Some time later the girl's kinsmen, her brothers or her father, uncle, visit her at her husband's place. There again the very first thing she does is to perform what is called /bhēt/. She sits down and holds the feet of the visitor and starts tuneful weeping in course of which she makes statements. As usual the male visitor does not weep, and he responds to her wept statements by talking about them in normal conversational mode. The common topics in this kind of /bhēt/ are the girl's grievances that her kinsman has taken a long time to visit her; her fear that once out of sight she is now out of their mind also, and at this rate she would be sooner rather than later completely forgotten. The contrast between the loving-kindness of her kinsmen and women on her parents' side and the real or imagined troubles of hers at this new place is a common topic of her wept statements. This introduces the mother-in-law theme, the ramifications of which reach far and beyond. This stylized, tuneful weeping at the visit of the girl's kinsmen functions as a message to the community that a visitor has come, and the eyes from behind the 'purdah' are eager to catch sight of him, and the ears are on the alert to hear what the newly wed girl has to communicate to her kinsman.

There is one more situation in which this kind of weeping occurs spontaneously. When two women, sisters or friends or from the same village, long separated, meet, no matter where, at a fair or walking on the road, they

catch hold of each other, their arms enfold each other, they either sit down or remain standing and exchange wept statements. Again the topics are the consequences of long separation, past memories, present woes, promises to one another never to forget what they hold in common. Again when married daughters come to visit their parents, they obligatorily perform /bhēt/ with their kinsmen and women, which resembles in all respects the /bhet/ at the time of their departure for their husband's house. The topics and themes are similar, and so are the feelings and attitudes expressed through the wept statements.

There is another social situation absolutely different from the ones we have been talking about in which tuneful weeping is a prescribed social behaviour for women alone. The situation occurs when some one dies in the family. At first there is a loud outburst of wailing and crying as the shock of death runs through the family. But after a while when the frenzied wailing subsides the women of the family settle down to the ritualized tuneful weeping. The women sit around the dead body and weep. Before the dead body is cremated, it is bathed and cleaned, and then it is taken out of the house. At that moment the women weep tunefully. When the pallbearers return home after cremating the dead body, the act of tuneful weeping is performed. The duration and incensity of it depend on the age, and the value of the dead person to the weepers. Women in the family weep everyday at a certain hour regularly until the last rites are performed after thirteen days. Almost every ritual connected with the religious ceremony necessitated by death is accompanied by tuneful weeping.

As in non-bereavement situations women alone participate in collective tuneful weeping. In this case they weep, singly and separately; they begin

and end tuneful weeping on their own. Men again are not obliged to weep tunefully or loudly.

The topics of wept statements in this social situation are appropriate to the relationship between the dead person and the women weeping for him. A wife weeping for her departed husband, a sister weeping for her dead brother, a mother weeping for her dead son, weep statements tunefully which are relevant to the relationship between them and the dead one. The refrain at the end of every wept statement naturally varies for it is made of the term of address which the weeper used for the dead person. Since in this society wives do not address their husbands by their first name, the refrain is /rajaurraau/. It is based upon one of the names of God and the word for king. Impressionistically speaking, the tuneful weeping in this situation sounds sadder and more pathetic than in non-bereavement situations.

There is still a third situation in which tuneful weeping occasionally occurs. Quarrels among women in joint families are quite common. At the end of the quarrel one of the parties may choose to weep out her grievances and her woes. This is usually aimed at the menfolk. She may go on a kind of hunger strike, shun food and water, and weep at regular intervals until her grievances are fully met and she is satisfied. But it is not obligatory for her to weep tunefully as it is when she is leaving her parents' home for the home of her husband, or as when somebody dies in the family. Of course, in this situation she weeps singly and separately. The topic is usually her grievance against the person with whom she has quarreled; and the suffering that has been her lot since her entry into this family. While she weeps she addresses her various kinsmen and women on the parents' side, and therefore the refrain keeps changing in one and the same session of tuneful

weeping. She may convey not only her complaints through the wept statements, she usually voices her threats too. The message is intended for all concerned to pay heed to her sad plight. It is quite effective especially if she keeps it up for long durations and many days.

These then are some of the social situations in which tuneful weeping as a mode of communication occurs in this society. It is a social behaviour prescribed as necessary and appropriate under the conditions described above. Women alone are privileged to use this mode. Under the given conditions, they have no choice in selecting this mode, it is obligatorily imposed upon them. To choose not to use it is to refuse to play one of the social roles expected of women in these communities. This exactly is what educated, urbanized, upper class married girls have started doing. This mode is thus likely to go out of existence, for sooner or later, through imitation of the upper class educated urban behaviour pattern of the married girls, others may also disregard it.[1]

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[1]This preliminary report on tuneful weeping is based upon the author's first hand knowledge of this socially prescribed behaviour in the Bhojpuri, Magahi and Maithili communities. Our observations, however, have been validated by checking and corsschecking them with many other members, both men and women, of these three above mentioned communities.

I would like to thank Professors Dell Hymes and Joel Sherzer for encouraging me to prepare this paper. I would also like to thank the following individuals for thier comments and suggestions: Professor J.B.P. Sinha, Professor Social Psychology, A.N.S. Institute of Social Studies, Patna; Dr. S. Coopal, Reader in History, Patna University; Mr. Nehikar Jha and Mr. G.S. Sinha, both of the Department of Sociology, Patna University.